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DRL/IRF FOR COFSKY; NSC STAFF FOR PASCUAL

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN COPTIC PRIEST JAILED IN LEGAL DISPUTE

REF: CAIRO 157

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart for Reason 1.4(d).

1.(SBU) Summary: For the first time in recent memory, an Egyptian criminal court has sentenced a Coptic Orthodox priest to prison. On October 12, a criminal court convicted the priest, Father Met'aus Abbas Wahby, pastor of the Kerdasa Coptic Orthodox Church in Giza, Cairo Governorate, of forgery and sentenced him to five years in prison. The forgery charge stems from Father Wahby's role in presiding over the recent wedding of a woman who converted from Islam to Christianity and apparently used a forged identification document to establish her Christian identity. Immediately following the conviction, Father Wahby was taken into custody and on October 15 was transferred to Cairo's Tora Prison. Lawyers for the Coptic Church expect to appeal the conviction and to petition for Father Wahby's release pending resolution of the appeal. End summary.

2.(SBU) Approximately one year ago, Father Wahby presided over the wedding of Reham Abdel Aziz - a women who converted from Islam to Christianity three years ago - and Ayman Fawzy, a Coptic Christian. Under Egyptian law, all citizens carry national identification cards reflecting the holder's religion, with Islam, Christianity and Judaism currently the only options. In connection with the wedding, Father Wahby would have examined the couple's identification cards to ensure that he was presiding over the marriage of two Christians, a Coptic Church requirement. According to Coptic Church sources, Aziz's identification card, while reflecting that she is Christian, was apparently a forgery. Because of the bureaucratic obstacles converts from Islam and Christianity face in obtaining identification documents reflecting their conversions, it is not uncommon for converts to obtain forged documents.

3.(C) In order to obtain a conviction of Father Wahby, Egyptian prosecutors would have had to establish that Father Wahby was aware that Aziz's identification card was a forgery, something the prosecutors apparently succeeded in doing, although it appears that Father Wahby and his lawyer were summoned to court with little notice and may not have had the opportunity to fully prepare a defense to the charge. The court also convicted Aziz and Fawzy of forgery. Also convicted of forgery were Wael Aziz Shakif, who served as a witness to the wedding contract, and Romany Nabil Fares, who was accused of preparing the forged identification card. Only Father Wahby appeared at the trial. The other four are reportedly in hiding, with Aziz and Fawzi possibly in Jordan.

4.(C) According to Coptic Church sources, the Church has asked its lawyers to appeal Father Wahby's conviction and petition for his release from prison pending resolution of the appeal. The Church directed its lawyers that in pursuing the case they are to strictly follow Egyptian law and to not request special treatment for Father Wahby.

5.(C) Comment: While we do not know if Father Wahby played any role in or was aware of the alleged forgery of Aziz's identification card, the case is illustrative of the endless problems created by Egypt's requirement that national identification documents reflect the holder's religion. This case will undoubtedly attract a great deal of attention because of the unprecedented imprisonment of a Coptic priest. Ultimately, however, the case will probably be defused through the appeals process or by the GoE simply dropping it.

As far as general reform of Egypt's identification document system, we see little prospect for action. Although Egypt's Baha'i minority has had some success in convincing the courts to authorize the issuance of identification documents with a dash in the religion field (reftel), there appears to be little support for doing away with the practice of including each Egyptian's religion on national identification documents. While some within the GoE recognize the need to address the issue, there is little incentive for action, both because of societal resistance and because of the complications that could be created for Egypt's legal system, which resolves many issues (e.g., divorce, inheritance) through the application of religion-specific laws.

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